

The Rich Get Richer and Elected

By STEVEN V. ROBERTS Special to The New York Times

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Congress

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 23 — The House of Representatives, which prides itself on being "the people's House," has been turning into a rich man's club.

The representatives newly elected in 1984 were almost four times as wealthy as the first-term lawmakers

elected only six years before, according to a new study based on the members' financial reports.

Behind this remarkable swing, the study says, are two main factors: a court decision that outlawed limits on what candidates could give to their own campaigns, and the enormous growth in the cost of pursuing a seat in Congress. As a result, it is increasingly difficult for candidates of modest means, particularly women, to mount successful challenges to entrenched office holders.

One solution, the authors contend, is a system of public financing for campaigns, but Congress seems in no mood to change the political rules any time soon.

"The lower chamber is going upper class," said Mark Green, the president of The Democracy Project, a public policy institute based in New York. "But this evolution from a House of Representatives to a House of Lords denies the diversity of our democracy. It establishes a de facto property qualification for office that increasingly says: low and middle income need not apply."

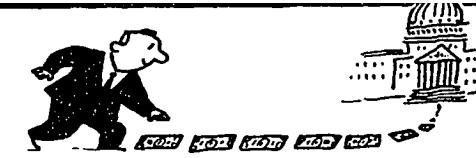
The Democracy Project produced the study in cooperation with the United States Public Interest Research Group, a similar institute situated in Washington. But their research was not entirely theoretical. In 1980 Mr. Green was the unsuccessful Democratic candidate for Congress in New York's 15th District, in Manhattan. The winner was Bill Green, one of the wealthiest members of Congress.

Of Assets and Millionaires

Members of Congress must report their assets in broad categories, not exact numbers, so the figures in the study are not precise. But the minimum average wealth of the 43 lawmakers first elected last year was \$251,292. Six years earlier, the 74 new members reported an average of only \$41,358 in assets. With inflation figured in, the increase was almost 400 percent in real terms.

Moreover, financial data on the class of 1978 indicated only one millionaire, William F. Clinger Jr., a Pennsylvania Republican. Last year's newcomers included 15 possible millionaires, more than a third of the entire group. Topping the list was Joseph J. DioGuardi, a Westchester Republican, who listed assets of \$1 million to \$2.46 million.

The main reason for the change, Mr. Green maintains, is the Supreme Court decision of 1976 in the case of *Buckley v. Valeo*. In that case, the Court ruled that limits mandated by Congress on the amount a candidate



Bill Green



Joseph J. DioGuardi



Tommy F. Robinson

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Mark Green

could give to his or her own campaign were an unconstitutional abridgment of individual rights. At the same time, the Court upheld limits on amounts contributed by outsiders.

"Quite naturally," Mr. Green said, "this puts a premium on personal wealth."

The 43 Representatives newly elected in 1984 spent an average of \$459,344; of that, \$50,329 was their own money in an average case. Eight of the 43 spent more than \$100,000 in personal funds, but the clear leader was Tommy F. Robinson, an Arkansas Democrat, who contributed \$441,167 to his own campaign. Mr. DioGuardi was next with a personal donation of \$210,000.

The Senate puts an even higher premium on wealth. Last year the average candidate for the Senate spent \$2 million, and the roster of millionaires in the Senate is steadily growing.

The second factor putting a premium on personal wealth, Mr. Green argues, is the rapid rise of political action committees. They tend to favor incumbents with their campaign contributions, and a result, Mr. Green says, is that it takes a wealthy challenger to make a race of things.

One apparent effect is the obstacle this poses for women who run for Congress. While women in rapidly rising numbers are capturing local and state offices, their representation on the national level has stayed static. The class of 1984 included only two women: Helen D. Bentley of Mary-

land and Jan Meyers of Kansas, both Republicans.

"It is largely men who control wealth in America," Mr. Green said, "and if wealth is a major variable in political success, that automatically means more men will run and win."

Fred Wertheimer, president of Common Cause, the public affairs lobby that studies campaign financing issues, summed up the situation this way: "Today, if you're not personally wealthy, and you're not willing to indebt yourself to the PAC's, you face an uphill struggle just to get your message on the table."

The authors of the study argue that some form of public financing for campaigns should be instituted. "Competition for public office should be based more upon merit than money," asserted Gene Karpinski, executive director of the public interest research group.

Mr. Wertheimer argues that "members of Congress know they have a national scandal on their hands" and are willing to consider public financing, or at least a total limit on PAC contributions. But the chances for change in the current system remain decidedly poor.

Obviously the current occupants of Capitol Hill have kept their seats under the present rules, which clearly favor incumbents. Accordingly, Mr. Green maintains, Congress is still probably "several scandals away" from a serious push to change the campaign system.